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homemakers' chat
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U. S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Wednesday, January 13, 1943

Subject: "WOMEN IN FORESTRY." Information from foresters of the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

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Today, more than ever before, women are entering fields that have been closed to them. One profession that up to now has belonged almost entirely to men is forestry. Yet right now women and girls are taking over forest jobs to pinch-hit for men who have answered the call to the colors or to war industries.

In New Hampshire, women are working in a sawmill, sawing lumber salvaged from trees damaged in the 1938 hurricane. Foresters of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, who hired this first feminine group for sawmill work, chose women with varied experience in manual work. For the protection of the women workers, the foresters installed extra safety devices, also automatic saws and other devices that do away with much of the heavy lifting and hauling.

Of course, forest work became a war job for women in Britain some time ago. In England the open-air industry appeals particularly to girls and women who have been doing clerical or domestic work. One forestry camp in England houses 160 girls. At first those in charge allowed only a few girls to fell trees. But the girls proved to be so keen and steady that soon large numbers were using the crosscut saw and swinging the ax. Operating in gangs, the girls now fell all but the largest trees.

Timber estimating and log scaling are other branches of the work women are doing in forestry in this country. They learn to identify types of trees, to recognize woods and know their use, and to scale the volume of logs.

Last spring, when the Nebraska National Forest lost its CCC camp, women helped out in the Forest Service nursery and made up planting crews to finish the planting of more than a million trees. Women even drove diesel tractors.

Ordinarily, planting small trees is considered "he-man's work." In this field planting, the workers carry a little box of trees on one arm. With the other hand, they take hold of the top of a tree and whip the roots down into a narrow trench made with a trenching machine. Then they tromp the soil in the trench close about each tree, and move along to the next spot.

In California last summer women helped look after some new shrubs that promise to bring our country its own rubber. In the early summer, weeds growing in the guayule (pronounced wy-oo-lee) nursery beds threatened to choke these new important rubber-bearing plants. Of the more than 2 thousand workers who pulled weeds, almost half were women from nearby communities. So you might say that women are indirectly helping to develop a new source of domestic rubber during the rubber shortage. The Forest Service handles the planting of the guayule shrubs, and plant scientists are doing the necessary research work on them.

In California, also, women have been taking special training for lookout and fire camp work. At the Lassen National Forest, the staff conducted the first class for women fire fighters in that area. A class of 20 women trained to replace men for lookout relief and fire camp work. The women proved capable of using light equipment for fighting small fires. In southern California the Angeles National Forest employed 8 women for fire lookout duty last summer.

In the National forests, lookout towers have to be manned constantly during the fire season. This past year man-and-wife teams "manned" a number of lookout stations. The lookout could leave immediately for any fire he spotted, and take command until another forest officer arrived. In the meantime, it was his wife's duty to keep looking for other fires. Many of the lookouts cooperated with the Army Interceptor Command in aircraft warning service. At stations operating 24 hours a day man and wife each took turn on duty.

Last fall 7 women were in a crew of 20 fire fighters who responded for

emergency duty on a fire in the Custer National Forest in Montana. The women stayed with the fire, working with the men 14 hours. When the crew first arrived on the scene of action, the blaze had spread over 13 acres and was going strong. Ordinarily, it would have been considered a 40-man fire, yet the mixed crew of 20 managed to control it.

In another National forest, 32 women took a course of training as fire cooks, camp bosses, radio operators and time keepers. As part of the training, the women served a fire camp meal to 30 men.... homemakers cooking food for freedom on the fire-fighting front. In this particular forest, women also helped out at the Forest Service warehouse where they packed up fire tools, got together emergency rations, made pack bags for pack outfits, repaired tents and silk parachutes and even drove trucks.

The Forest Service says the real test of the ability of volunteer forest fire fighters will come this year when the shortage of men will be more acute than last year. The spring forest fire season will soon be under way in the South. After that the forest fire season opens in the New England and Atlantic seaboard States.

Women will have an opportunity to line up for various jobs in connection with fire fighting in some rural areas by joining the Nation-wide volunteer Forest Fire Fighters Service. Local defense councils are receiving applications. In some States, high school students are planning to enroll for duty during the summer months and early fall. Girls will serve as clerks, drivers of light trucks, and first aid attendants, in addition to fire spotters from lookout stations.

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